

Vermont Senate Education Subcommittee
Testimony of: Mark Tucker, Superintendent, Caledonia Central Supervisory Union (CCSU)
Categorical Grants for ELL Students
February 3, 2022

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The CCSU Administration supports the full implementation of the UVM Weighting Study recommendations, as presented. We do not support the alternative approach of creating categorical grants to address some aspects of today's inequitable weighting formula.

Our opposition to categorical grants has two bases: 1) Our belief that the Weighting Study recommendations are a "package deal" that provides a clear and balanced path to resolving financial inequities in the distribution of Ed Fund monies; and 2) Our experience with the Small Schools Grant, a form of categorical grant, which historically we find problematic:

- The amount of the grant each year does not keep up with simple inflation, and so far as I can tell, the calculation does not consider the impacts of such factors as the overwhelming costs imposed on my small schools by student trauma;
- The administrative process for the grant is not timely. The grant amount is not finalized until well after the respective Boards have finalized the next budget. When budgeting, we have to "guess" that the amount awarded for the upcoming fiscal year will at least equal last year's grant, and when it isn't (and it often comes in lower than the prior year), we miss a revenue projection.
- One District, Peacham, was initially determined to be disqualified one year (FY '20) because of a simple staffing increase that was necessitated by student need¹. Penalizing a District for meeting the needs of a particular student is ironic, given that the focus of the weighting study is on equity;
- Categorical grants are subject to Legislative "tweaking" up and down from year to year. This creates a challenge if the money from the grants is applied to staffing to meet student needs; the potential reduction of funding from one year to the next could introduce instability in our workforce.
- Overall, categorical grants, while addressing some of the additional costs that challenge rural Districts, will have unintended consequences in the area of budgeting that do not arise with a simple adjustment to student weighting. This is because of the direct tie between enrollment and ADM – which is determined early in the school year - and the calculation of the equalized pupil count. If the Legislature wishes to take the route of categorical grants, we believe that significant mandates that address the timing concerns expressed above has to be part of the Legislative directive.

¹ The FY '20 Small Schools Grant was restored as a result of Legislative action, but not before the District had delayed its budget vote until the end of the session.

So what I just presented is a general argument against the concept of categorical grants to school districts. In regards to the specifics of the ELL grant, CCSU currently has just a handful of ELL students – the numbers have never gone above six in any of the years that I have served this SU. The opacity of the current Equalized Pupil formula has made it difficult for me to determine the degree to which my schools who have ELL students have benefitted from the current weighting in the form of additional Equalized Pupils, though the effect would seem small (less than 1.0 Equalized Pupil). With that in mind, on its face the categorical grant proposal, with its specific dollar grant, looks like free money to me.

However, what might end up being attractive to me with my low student count may have different implications for larger districts in the State.

So, I want to be clear that I am not just speaking to the impact of categorical grants for ELL students from my local perspective. I am acutely tuned to issues of underfunding and what it does to an overall school system. Just as we have suffered for years under the flaws of current weighting when it comes to special education and trauma costs in my small schools, I respect the concerns of my colleagues in the larger districts with high ELL student counts. If the goal of this work is to make fundamental changes to funding that address historical inequities for special subsets of our school populations, from an administrative standpoint it would be simpler to accomplish this through weighting rather than creating a separate grant mechanism with its own reporting and compliance requirements.

One last point – I continue to hear of concerns that school districts will not use the increases in funding – whether from weighting changes or categorical grants – to benefit their students, but instead will use the extra money to “buy-down” their local tax rates. This perspective implies a lack of trust on the part of those who espouse it that local school boards, school administrators, Superintendents, etc. have anything but the best interest of their students in mind. We operate our schools under a number of federal mandates that require us to meet the learning needs of special populations – three that come to mind are special education, ELL, and homeless students. I believe that even without the federal mandates, we would be operating under a moral commitment to these populations, but if there is any doubt about the integrity of school leaders, you can at least assume that we are all following federal mandates. These mandates cost money that has a disproportionate impact on Districts with high special population counts.

Several of my small schools have struggled for years to maintain our obligation to our special populations *in the face of* a lack of adequate financial support. This lack of resources ironically affects the general population more than the special populations, which have fixed financial expectations under law and moral duty. Our response in the face of fixed needs and shrinking revenue *always* takes the form of staffing and other program cuts in general programs that affect ALL students equally. If there is any benefit to accrue to local taxpayers from the proposed changes to weighting it will not come from us abandoning our obligations to our students. If it comes from having adequate resources to meet these students’ needs, that is not a gift to my districts – it is simply a leveling of a long-uneven playing field in this complex world of Vermont education funding that relies too much on local property taxes to make it all work.

Respectfully,

Mark Tucker, M.A.
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